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Steam rising from the kettle,
sunlight seeping in through the
crack of my floral shades, my mint
green tea timer resting on the
kitchen counter, an empty bottle
sitting next to it, the criss-cross
pattern on my gray wool socks.

Five things I can see. Standing in
the kitchen, bleary-eyed and
groggy, I brush a pile of curls off
my forehead, rest my elbow
against the cold Formica counter,
rub the soft flannel of my pajama
shirt, and finally tap my foot
against the terrazo. *That's four
things I can touch.* Adrian pads his

way into the kitchen behind me, gentle steps across the floor. The low rumble of the water whistles to a boil, then the clink of two glasses being placed in the sink sends my body and brain into a slow simmer of its own. *Three things I can hear.* He stands beside me as he reaches over my head and pulls down two mugs from my creaky wooden cabinet. I don't turn my head to look at him, I'm still trying to ground myself from the anxiety spiral I'm in after last night, but I don't need to search far for two things I can smell. His earthy woodsmoke and wintermint scent surrounds me as he places the

mugs on the counter. He crosses the room toward the cupboard, presumably to retrieve my tea box.

“What number are you on?” he asks.

The fact that he knows me well enough to know I’m in coping-mechanism mode brings me down another notch. There’s still one of my senses left to find. I touch my fingertips to my mouth, where I can still taste the honey-sweet press of his kiss on my lips.

“Almost done,” I say. Five slow breaths in and out, and I’m at least stable enough to turn and look at him now. I slowly face him as he

shuffles back into my space bubble. “Are you wearing my robe?”

He leans against the counter next to me, all sleep-mussed and dreamy-eyed. “It’s so cozy, Mel.”

Despite the smoldering sensation brewing in my chest, I grin as I nod my head. “I’m aware.”

“So are your slippers,” he says around a yawn, rubbing his right foot against my left.

I glance down at my pale pink slippers covered in tiny strawberries.

“I thought those looked familiar,” I say.

He dangles a tea bag in front of my nose, and I reach up to take it from him. I always smell my tea before settling it in my cup. His hand lingers on mine, and I tense at the contact, if only to resist snuggling into him. He gently squeezes before letting go. On a shaky inhale, I sniff the tea leaves and aroma of chamomile settles all the way in the center of my chest. Birdsong fills the air outside my kitchen window. He places his winter rooibos tea in his mug, and I busy myself, pouring water over them to let them steep. It's all so

familiar, except for the unspoken tension that comes from kissing your best friend the night before.

For Adrian's part, he's mellow as ever, the picture of contentment, standing here in my kitchen, wearing my robe and drinking my tea and unknowingly holding my heart in his hand.

"So, are we going to talk about last night?" he asks.

"Nope," I say, far too quickly. I stare at the steam drifting up and away from my mug, and reach for my tea timer, setting it for seven minutes.

He gently bumps his arm against my shoulder. "C'mon, Mel."

I shiver at the contact, feeling off balance. I don't think I could do my grounding exercises right now, even if I wanted to. My senses are all officially overwhelmed by Adrian, boiled down to one confusing nameless emotion.

"Hey, you're cold," he says, already untying the belt of my robe and pulling it off his broad shoulders that I'm constantly trying not to notice. I'm not that cold, but I don't stop him from slipping the cotton snugly around me and tying the belt into a tiny bow at my

waist. This is the effect Adrian has always had on me. All ten years of our friendship have been a fever dream of yearning for moments like this, then freezing when they happen, because I know that for him it's all just fun. I've existed as his best friend all this time, and it was manageable for me when I didn't know for sure what it was like to be fully engulfed by him, like last night. "Better?" he asks.

Better isn't the word I'd use. It's borderline unbearable to feel so much at once like this.

“Mhmm,” I mumble, steeping my tea bag just so I have something to do with my hands.

He’s facing me now, my gaze set on my woolen socks pressed up against the edges of the slippers he’s wearing. They must be at least two sizes too small on him. He tips my face up. “Why can’t we talk about it?”

Why not? Because I’ve only dared to long for this to happen for years, and now that it has, I don’t know what to do. Somewhere between the two of us getting back to my place after his sister’s wedding last night, to splitting the last of the

cider left in my fridge while sitting on my couch, laughing about how his impromptu joke was a flop during his speech, my punch drunk brain decided one kiss would finally set me free from this constant ache to be closer to him. Except once he pulled me into his lap and our lips pressed together, all I wanted was more. It took everything in me to stop it from going further once my brain caught up with my heart.

“Because that was part of the deal. Remember? I was your fake date to the wedding. We were pretending for one night. Now, it’s a new day.”

All night, we'd joked about fake dating and glass slippers and his electric car turning into a pumpkin. When he pulled me close on the couch, I was giddy. "We're still on a fake date until midnight," I'd said. In a whisper he told me he'd wanted to kiss me all night.

"So there's nothing to talk about? Not even how you panicked and left me on your couch after we kissed?" he says, bringing me back to the present. At each tick of the tea timer, my brain supplies another reason why I'm terrified to have this conversation. What I'm most afraid to hear him say.

It won't change things.

It didn't mean anything.

We can just go back to being friends.

Ten years of avoiding this scenario, and I screw it up in one night.

“Please Mel, say something.”

There's an unsteadiness to his voice that I'm not used to, and when I dare to meet his eyes, they're darker than their usual golden brown. Sweltering. His cheeks are flushed. His hand taps against the counter. There's something almost desperate about him right now, all his usual ease

replaced by anxious energy. For all the times he's been by my side through anxiety and panic attacks, he deserves the same. For the first time, I'm struck that I'm not the only one who stands to lose something here. I'm terrified of what he might say, but the kiss was mutual and it's not fair of me to hold back just to spare my own feelings at the expense of his, whatever they may be.

He taps my forehead three times, the delicate touch setting me aflame. "Please tell me what's brewing up here?"

Sometimes I think it can't just be me. Like we've been on some sort of simmering precipice almost as long as we've known each other. That might actually be what scares me the most. The idea that it could all change. That in the process of our relationship evolving, it falls apart instead. I need to let him put me out of my misery and figure out how to go back to being just friends and forget what it feels like to have all of me pressed up against all of him on the couch. I intend to say this to him, the part about being friends. I inhale and practice it in my head, then, inexplicably, a different set of words pour out of

my mouth entirely. “What did you mean in your speech at the wedding? It wasn't what you practiced.”

For someone who spends so much of her time overthinking, I sure can be impulsive when it comes to Adrian. We'd laughed about it last night, how he went off script from the speech he'd been practicing all week, instead naming all the times he could tell his sister was in love with Quinn before she finally admitted it. Then he tried to finish with a joke, but botched it and just ended the speech with a toast to “falling”.

He scratches at the back of his neck, backing up slightly. This time it's him who is putting space between us. "Not impressed with my improv?" he says, voice strangled. It's strange to see Adrian, who is usually the rock, faltering under my gaze for once. It makes me feel braver.

"If you regret the kiss, please just tell me," I say. "We can go back to the way things were, pretend it never happened, whatever you want."

His eyes are Earl grey now, and my heartbeat is in my throat. "I don't."

My chest splits in half and a tear springs from my eye. Him not wanting to be friends anymore is exactly why I was afraid of this. "I understand," I say. "I never should have kissed you, knowing I was the only one with feelings. It doesn't have to ruin our friendship."

Confusion passes over his features. *Five things I can see.* His forehead wrinkles. His eyes soften again, green tea on a summer day. The smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. The tiny scar on his chin. Pale cheeks flushed. Some sort of understanding seems to settle. He's figuring out I'm in love with him, and even in my worst

nightmares about him rejecting me, it never felt this tragic. His hand closes over mine on the counter. He's trying to let me down easy, I'm sure.

"That's where you're wrong, Mel."

My lips quiver. "You don't want to stay friends?"

He shakes his head ruefully, thumb brushing over my knuckles, and take a deep inhale of his own. "The time we were at iHop and the server spilled orange juice on my lap and you laughed so hard that you knocked your iced tea over on yourself."

I stare at him, feeling disoriented, by the long-ago memory.

“The night that woman from the dating app stood me up and you met me at the bar and we ended up singing karaoke until 2am.”

A laugh escapes, even though I’m still wildly confused. “You told the Lyft driver you were ‘Prince reincarnated’ on the way home.”

He grins, looking more like himself again. “Yesterday, when I picked you up to drive to the ceremony and the second you saw me you threw your arms around me and whispered, ‘hey there, fake date’ into my ear.”

My skin pricks. “Our friendship really is perfect as is.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, Mel. I went off script because all I could think about the whole night was every moment over the past ten years where I was falling in love with you. I don't regret the kiss. You're not the only one with feelings.”

Tears are cascading down my cheeks now. “And you just realized it last night, during our fake date?”

He pulls me closer, and I nestle into him until I'm flush against his chest. “I've known it for a long, long time,” he says into my hair.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

He laughs and brushes a kiss to my forehead. “You're not the only one who's allowed to be scared, you know.”

Relief stirs in my chest, then emanates. I get to keep the pieces of Adrian I already loved and collect more. It’s not over.

Happiness pools to the surface and I’m giddy, I think. “Well, I've been in love with you longer. The *whole* time.”

He grins. “Your competitive streak. It’s on my list.”

I'm stunned, but not *stunned* stunned. The fear that he might

feel the same way was always overshadowed by the fear he wouldn't.

“Did you know I felt the same? The whole time?”

His hand traces up and down my arm. “I had my suspicions. But I always knew I had to wait for the right time. I know how hard change is for you. How your brain needs to be in the right place to accept something new. Last night, it felt like you were there. I never wanted you to be hasty or regret me. Having you there was enough. But I've always wanted more, Mel. I've

been in love with you almost as long as you have with me.”

“Almost,” I repeat with a smile.

He brushes my curls away from my face, holding my cheeks in his hands. “When we kiss again, you're not going to try to hide from me?”

I slip my arms around his waist.

“No,” I say. I may, in fact, ignite, if I don't get closer to him right this second, for how long this feeling has been brewing. The tea timer chimes behind us.

“Tea is ready,” he says.

I smile, and warmth fills me to the brim. “So am I.”